
Opening Extract from...

Vanished Kingdoms

The History of Half-Forgotten Europe

Written by Norman Davies

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I

Tolosa

Sojourn of the Visigoths
(AD 418–507)


D 12
VOUILLÉ
Fonds

I

Vouillé, formerly Vouillé-la-Bataille, is a small country *bourg* of some three thousand souls in the French Département de la Vienne, and *chef-lieu* of a rural commune in the region of Poitou-Charente. It lies close to the Route Nationale 149, the old Roman road that runs from Poitiers to Nantes, and it is traversed by a pleasant stream, the Auzance, as it meanders towards the Atlantic. It boasts two churches, two schools, a tiny central square entered through an arch, a large *terrain de pétanques*, some fine riverside gardens, a town hall, a couple of restaurants, a modest stadium, a tall water tower, a listed chateau-hotel, Le Périgny, a Saturday market, and no special celebrity. It is also the presumed site of an early sixth-century battle. A memorial plaque, erected by the local history society in 2007 on the 1,500th anniversary, is so well hidden that the *Office de tourisme* in the square cannot always say exactly where it is.[1]

In one of those delectable adjectival flourishes which the French language adores, the inhabitants of Vouillé rejoice in the name of Vouglaisiens or Vouglaisiennes; they call the surrounding district, popular with ramblers, the Pays Vouglaisien. Not surprisingly, they take great pride in their *patrimoine*, the legacy of their forebears. A statement made in 1972 by the president of the local Syndicat d'Initiative can be found both on the municipal website and on a simple monument erected at the Carrefour de Clovis. '*L'histoire de la France*', it says with no noticeable modesty, '*commença donc a Vouillé*' ('The history of France began at Vouillé').[2]

II

On 24 August 410 Alaric the Visigoth achieved the ultimate goal of the many barbarian chiefs who invaded the crumbling Roman Empire of the West. At the third attempt, he sacked Rome:

> Having surrounded the city and once more reduced the inhabitants to the verge of starvation, he effected an entry at night through the Salarian Gate . . . This time, the king was in no humour to spare the capital of the world. The sack lasted for two or three days. Some respect was shown for churches . . . [but] the palace of Sallust . . . was burned down; and excavations on the Aventine [Hill], then a fashionable aristocratic quarter, have revealed many traces of the fires which destroyed the plundered houses. A rich booty and numerous captives, including the Emperor's sister, Galla Placidia, were taken.
>
> On the third day, Alaric led his triumphant host forth . . . and marched southward . . . His object was to cross over to Africa, probably for the purpose of establishing his people in that rich country . . . But his days were numbered. He died at Consentia [Cosenza] before the end of the year.[3]

Alaric's name meant 'the Ruler of All'.

Alaric's people, known as the Visigoths – in German, the *Westgoten* – had been the first of the Germanic hordes to break into the Roman Empire. Originating in the distant Baltic region but long settled in the abandoned province of Dacia (in modern Romania), they were semi-itinerant agriculturalists who typically stayed for long periods in one fertile vicinity before moving on to the next. They were also converts to the Arian branch of Christianity.* Displaced from their earlier districts of residence, they were seeking a new place to rest. But they never made it to Africa. Instead, being stranded in southern Italy after the sack of Rome, they bargained their way to a new accommodation with the Romans. Their success inspired their Gothic kinsfolk whom they had left far behind in Eastern Europe. Within three generations, their cousins, the Ostro- or 'Eastern' Goths, would follow them on the road to Italy.[4]

The Visigoths were not a tribe, in the usual sense of the word; and there is some doubt whether their name can be etymologically connected with

* Arius of Alexandria (d. 336), the principal heresiarch of the fourth century, was condemned by the Church Council of Nicaea for denying the full divinity of Christ and hence the prevailing view on the nature of the Trinity. After Nicaea, his teaching was banned by the imperial authorities.

'the West'. They had been brought together from a variety of ethnic components during Alaric's wanderings, and they only acquired the 'Western' epithet after becoming separated from the main Gothic concentration.

Alaric's exploits broke the spell that held back many of his barbarian counterparts. As a Byzantine commentator had noted, the Empire was not protected by 'rivers, lagoons or parapets, but by fear' – fear being 'an obstacle that no man has surmounted once he is convinced that he is inferior'.[5] Thanks to Alaric, the barbarians lost their sense of inferiority.

The spectacular rites of Alaric's funeral caused comment among the ancients, and have inspired much speculation among modern historians and anthropologists:

> The ferocious character of the barbarians was displayed in the funeral of a hero whose valour . . . they celebrated with mournful applause . . . they forcibly diverted the course of the Busentinus, a small river that washes the walls of Consentia. The royal sepulchre, adorned with the splendid spoils and trophies of Rome, was constructed in the vacant bed; the waters were then restored to their natural channel; and the secret spot where the remains of Alaric had been deposited was for ever concealed by the inhuman massacre of the prisoners who had been employed to execute the work.[6]

Despite his sensational reputation, however, 'the Ruler of All' achieved none of his long-term objectives. He was the eternal wanderer, who constantly switched his allegiance. In turn he had been Rome's ally, Rome's enemy, Rome's destroyer, a legitimate emperor's protector and a usurper's partner.[7]

In Alaric's time, the Western Empire was inundated by barbarian hordes moving across the Empire's frontiers in many directions. Britannia was succumbing to Picts from the north, to Scots from Hibernia and to Germanic raiders besieging 'the Saxon shore' to the south-east. Roman Gaul had been transfixed by 'the horde of hordes' that crossed the frozen Rhine in the winter of 406/7. War-bands of Vandals, Alans and Suevi were ransacking Gallia Aquitania in the south and spilling over the mountains into Iberia. Further hordes, including the Huns, were lining up to take the Visigoths' route through the Danubian provinces.

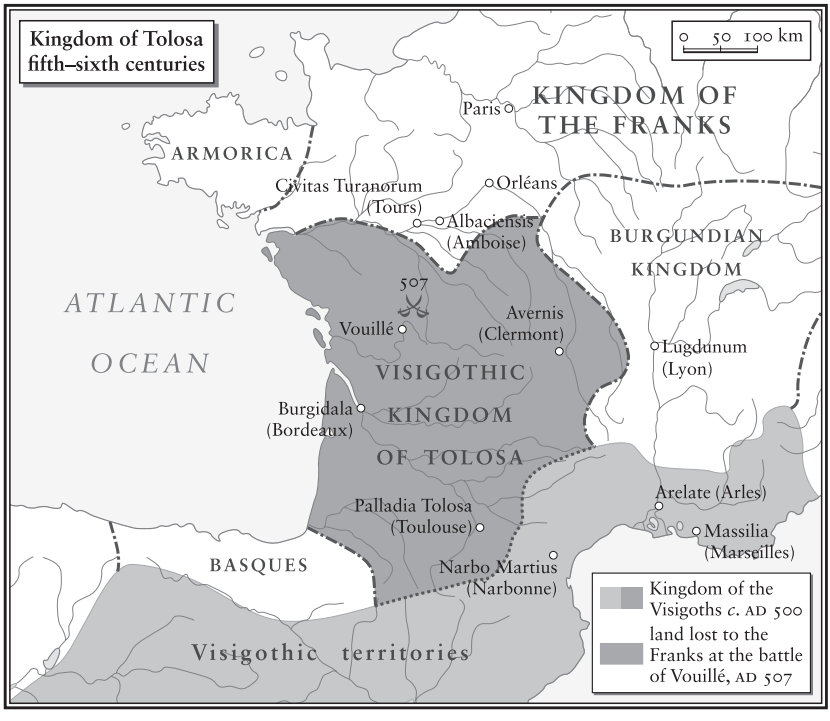
Alaric's successor as leader of the Visigoths, therefore, struck a deal with imperial Rome. Ataulf – the 'Noble Wolf' – agreed to leave Italy and to chase his fellow barbarians from Gaul and Spain. His one condition was that he could return to the status of an imperial *foederatus* or 'ally', which Alaric had once enjoyed. As reported by a contemporary, the historian Paulus Orosius, Ataulf's 'Declaration' makes interesting reading:

> I once aspired [he said] . . . to obliterate the name of Rome; to erect on its ruins the dominion of the Goths; and to acquire, like Augustus, the immortal fame of the founder of a new empire. By repeated experiments [however,] I was gradually convinced that laws are essentially necessary . . . and that the fierce untractable humour of the Goths was incapable of bearing the salutary yoke of . . . civil government . . . it is now my sincere wish that the gratitude of future ages should acknowledge the merit of a stranger, who employed the sword of the Goths, not to subvert, but to restore and maintain, the prosperity of the Roman empire.[8]

The decade following Alaric's death was filled with violent conflict not only between the Visigoths and their rivals but also among the leading Visigothic families. Ataulf marched his people from Italy to southern Gaul and Spain, where they attacked the Vandals, Suevi and Alans. At the same time, a simmering feud between Alaric's own dynasty and the rival Amalfings was reignited. Ataulf, who had married the captive Galla Placidia, was murdered in his palace at Barcelona in 415, together with their children. So, too, was his immediate successor, Sidericus, 'the king of five days'. The man who then emerged as leader, a brave warrior and an astute diplomat called Vallia, is sometimes identified as Alaric's bastard son. It was Vallia who negotiated the key treaty whereby the Visigoths reconfirmed their status as imperial allies and received a permanent home in Roman Aquitania.

The 'Kingdom of Tolosa', therefore, started its life as a dependent but autonomous imperial sub-state. It occupied one of the three parts into which Gaul had traditionally been divided, and it was ruled by its tribal chiefs operating under the standard rules of imperial *hospitalitas*. By decree of the Emperor Honorius, the Visigoths took possession of their new capital of Palladia Tolosa (the modern Toulouse) in 418. After Vallia, they were to be ruled for the rest of the century by five kings: Theodoric I, Thorismund, Theodoric II, Euric and Alaric II. Theodoric I and Alaric II would both be killed in battle. Thorismund and Theodoric II were both murdered. Euric, the younger brother of both Thorismund and of the second Theodoric, brought the kingdom to the peak of its wealth and power.[9]

The Visigoths took over Aquitania after a long period of disquiet, apparently without provoking serious opposition. The Gallo-Roman nobility, which had once joined a rebel Gallic Empire, were not noted for their docility. Yet the new overlords were zealous imitators of Roman ideals,



and the smack of strong government went unopposed. The Visigothic kings were given to taking hostages and to punishing disloyal subjects, but they did not indulge in gratuitous violence. Numerous Romans entered their service, notably the military general Nepotanius, the admiral Namatius of Saintes, and Victorius, the *dux super septem civitates*, or 'commander of Septimania'.[10] The Visigoths did not legislate separately for the Gallo-Romans, suggesting a willingness to assimilate; a new system of land tenure did not involve significant confiscations; and in religious matters, the Arian practices of the Visigothic clergy proceeded in parallel to the well-established network of Roman bishoprics and rural churches. The fact that the General Church Council of Agde could take place in Visigothic territory in 506 suggests that the non-Arians had no special fear for their safety.[11]

The Roman city of Tolosa, built on the plain beneath an ancient Celtic hill fort, had been given the epithet Palladia by the Emperor Domitian in honour of the goddess Pallas Athena, patroness of the arts. Surrounded by walls of Augustan vintage, it was fully furnished with aqueducts, theatres, baths and an elaborate sewage system, and it served the strategic Via Aquitania, which ran across southern Gaul from the Mediterranean

to the Atlantic. From the fourth century onwards, it was an active centre of imperial Christianity and the seat of a bishop. St Saturnin, one of the first apostles of Gaul, had been martyred in Tolosa in *c.* 257, dragged through the streets by a wild bull. The basilica where his relics were guarded was the main focus of Nicene worship. The chief church of the Arians was at Nostra Domina Daurata, founded in the mid-fifth century on the site of a former temple to Apollo.

Aquitania, in fact, had a long tradition of energetic theological debate. St Hilarius of Poitiers (*c.* 300–368) was renowned as the *Malleus Arianorum*, an early 'Hammer of the Arians'. St Experius (d. 410), bishop of Tolosa, is remembered as the recipient of a letter from Pope Innocent I that fixed the canon of Holy Scripture. The priest Vigilantius (*fl. c.* 400), in contrast, was regarded as a bold dissident who condemned the superstitious cult of saints and relics. St Prosper of Aquitania (*c.* 390–455) was a historian, a disciple of St Augustine and the first continuator of Jerome's Universal Chronicle;[12] and St Rusticus of Narbonne (d. 461), a champion of what would later emerge as 'Catholicism', battled against both the new Nestorian heresy* and the older Arianism of his Visigoth masters.

Once Visigothic rule was established, the kingdom expanded dramatically. Acquisitions were made in almost every decade of the fifth century. The conquest of Narbo Martius (Narbonne) in 436 provided direct access to the Mediterranean. The whole of Septimania followed later by gift of the imperial authorities. In the aftermath of the mid-century irruption of the Huns, the Visigoths roamed far to the north, well beyond the Loire, and in 470 they surged into central Gaul, incorporating both Civitas Turonum (Tours) and Arvernis (Clermont). After that, they took possession of Arelate (Arles) and Massilia (Marseille), and, during a systematic campaign of conquest in Iberia, reached the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar). From 474, a Roman in the Visigothic service, Vincentius, ruled as the king's deputy in Iberia with the title of *dux hispaniarum*. By the turn of the century, they controlled the largest of all the states in the post-Roman West, and looked set to become the principal winner among the Empire's barbarian predators.

Theodoric I, or Theodorid (r. 419–51), was blessed with numerous sons and daughters, and used them to found an elaborate network of dynastic

* Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople in 428–31, the principal heresiarch of the fifth century, was condemned by the Council of Ephesus for holding that Christ's nature was equally human and divine.

alliances. But he is best remembered both by contemporary chroniclers and by later historians for his valiant part in the repulse of Attila's Huns. He perished as a faithful ally of the imperial general, Flavius Aetius, leading his warriors in June 451 into the bloody fray of the Catalaunian Fields* which preserved Gaul from the most terrible horsemen of the steppes.[13] He was succeeded in turn by three of his sons.

According to Gibbon, Thorismund (r. 451–3) had played the key role in the victory where his father perished, holding his forces in reserve on the nearby heights until he swept down and drove the Huns from the field. The victory brought him little reward. He was murdered by his brother Theodoric before his power could be consolidated, reputedly for threatening to break with the Roman alliance.

Theodoric II (r. 453–66), has enlivened the historical record partly through the colourful name of his wife, Queen Pedauco – meaning 'Goose Foot' – and partly through a rare eyewitness description of him by the Latin writer Sidonius Apollinaris. Sidonius (432–88) was bishop of Arvernis, and hence a subject of the Visigoths. One of his surviving letters answered a request from a friend to describe the king in detail:

> Well, he is a man worth knowing . . . He is well set up, in height above the average man, but below the giant. His head is round, with curled hair retreating . . . His nervous neck is free from disfiguring knots. The eyebrows are bushy and arched; when the lids droop, the lashes reach almost half-way down the cheeks. The upper ears are buried under overlying locks, after the fashion of his race. The nose is finely aquiline; the lips are thin and not [unduly] enlarged . . . Every day the hair springing from his nostrils is cut back; . . . and his barber is assiduous in eradicating the rich growth on the lower part of the face. Chin, throat, and neck are full, but not fat, and all of fair complexion . . . they often flush, but from modesty, and not from anger. His shoulders are smooth, the upper- and forearms strong and hard; hands broad, breast prominent; waist receding. The spine dividing the broad expanse of back does not project, and you can see the spring of the ribs; the sides swell with salient muscle, the well-girt flanks are full of vigour. His thighs are like hard horn; the knee-joints firm and masculine; the knees themselves the comeliest and least wrinkled in the world. A full ankle supports the leg, and the foot is small to bear such mighty limbs.
>
> . . . Before daybreak he goes with a very small suite to attend the service of his priests. He prays with assiduity, but . . . one may suspect more of habit than conviction in his piety. Administrative duties . . . take up the rest of

* An unconfirmed site usually located in the vicinity of Châlons-en-Champagne.

> the morning. Armed nobles stand about the royal seat; the mass of guards in their garb of skins are . . . kept at the threshold . . . [F]oreign envoys are introduced. The king hears them out, and says little; . . . but accelerates matters ripe for dispatch. The second hour arrives; he rises from the throne to inspect his treasure-chamber or stable.

The bishop, clearly an admirer, warms to the task:

> If the chase is the order of the day, he joins it, but never carries his bow at his side, considering this derogatory to royal state. When a bird or beast is marked for him . . . he puts his hand behind his back and takes the bow from a page with the string all hanging loose . . . He will ask you beforehand what you would like him to transfix; you choose, and he hits. If there is a miss . . . your vision will mostly be at fault, and not the archer's skill.
>
> On ordinary days, his table resembles that of a private person. The board does not groan beneath a mass of dull and unpolished silver set on by panting servitors; the weight lies rather in the conversation than in the plate; there is either sensible talk or none. The hangings and draperies . . . are sometimes of purple silk, sometimes only of linen; art, not costliness, commends the fare . . . Toasts are few . . . In short, you will find the elegance of Greece, the good cheer of Gaul, Italian nimbleness . . . and everywhere the discipline of a king's house . . . The siesta after dinner is . . . sometimes intermitted. When inclined for the board-game, he is quick to gather up the dice, examines them with care, shakes the box with expert hand, throws rapidly, humorously apostrophizes them, and patiently waits the issue. Silent at a good throw, he makes merry over a bad [one] . . . always the philosopher . . . Sometimes, though this is rare, supper is enlivened by sallies of mimes, but no guest is ever exposed to the wound of a biting tongue. Withal there is no noise of hydraulic organ, or choir with its conductor intoning a set piece; you will hear no players of lyre or flute, no master of the music, no girls with cithara or tabor; the king cares for no strains but those which no less charm the mind with virtue than the ear with melody. When he rises to withdraw, the treasury watch begins its vigil; armed sentries stand on guard during the first hours of slumber . . . I must stay my pen; you asked for nothing more than one or two facts . . . and my own aim was to write a letter, not a history. Farewell.[14]

Theodoric II's reign came to grief through the vagaries of imperial politics. In 455, the newly appointed Roman commander in Gaul, Eparchius Avitus, visited Tolosa. News arrived during his visit that Rome had been sacked for a second time, by the Vandals; and Theod-

oric seized the opportunity to proclaim Avitus emperor. He then conducted the first of the Visigoths' incursions into Iberia, justifying his conquests as the recovery of imperial land. His claims did not convince the next emperor, Majorian, described by Gibbon as 'a great and heroic character', who briefly reasserted imperial authority in Gaul with energy.

Theodoric's younger brother, Euric (or Evaric or Erwig, r. 466–84), seized power in the midst of military conflicts involving not only Visigoths and imperial forces but also a number of Visigothic factions. He killed his brother, defeated a rampaging Celtic warlord, Riothamus, recrossed the Pyrenees and settled a body of Ostrogothic mercenaries from Roman service in his lands. Lawgiver as well as warrior chief, he turned out to be the most rounded personality of his House. Though familiar with Latin, he usually spoke to foreign envoys in Gothic through an interpreter. The Arian services of his royal chapel were also conducted in Gothic. He extended his realms right across Iberia. The *Codex Euricianus* of 471 was the first attempt in the post-Roman world to commit a summary of customary Germanic laws to writing.[15] It was a sign of political maturity. In 476, Euric persuaded the penultimate emperor of the West, Julius Nepos, to relinquish even nominal Roman suzerainty over the Visigoths' lands. Before he died, the Roman Empire in the West had collapsed completely. The Kingdom of Tolosa was left orphaned and sovereign.

Meticulous scholarship has tracked the progression of Visigothic kingship in the fifth century. In the first stage, the tendency was to emulate all forms of Roman legal practice and Latin titles. In the middle stage, the *Reges Gothorum* saw themselves as something better than mere *foederati*. In the last stage, as successors to the Empire, they thought themselves as good as any emperor. Over the same decades, the upper stratum of Visigothic society, the *optimates*, gradually lost their influence. Germanic tradition had stressed the equality of all warriors. Post-Roman monarchy stressed hierarchy and regal dignity.[16]

Thanks to the Frankish chronicler Gregory of Tours (534–94), Euric has been stained with the label of a persecutor of Catholics. The insinuation is unjust. A few dissaffected clerics like Bishop Quinctianus of Civitas Rutenorum (Rodez) were driven into exile. But nothing occurred to match the savage persecutions perpetrated by the Arian Vandals in North Africa.[17]

Shortly after the deaths both of Euric and of Romulus Augustulus, the last of the Western emperors, Flavius Teodoricus, alias Theodoric

the Ostrogoth, accepted Byzantine instructions to march on Italy and to restore imperial fortunes. He crossed the Alps with a huge army in 488, scattered the defenders of the post-Roman order, and killed its leader, Odoacer, with his own bare hands, after a three-year siege of Ravenna. Calling on the aid of his Visigoth cousins, he overran the Italian peninsula from end to end and assumed the title of 'vice-emperor'. Bolstered by the military and cultural power of Byzantium, and by great maritime potential, his Ostrogothic kingdom based at Ravenna soon threatened to overshadow its neighbours and rivals. In addition to the Visigothic Kingdom of Tolosa, it bordered the (second) Kingdom of the Burgundians recently established in the valley of the Rhône (see pp. 94–5).[18]

Euric's son, Alaric II, who succeeded as a boy in 484, was the eighth of the royal line. He spent much energy mollifying neighbours and subjects alike. His greatest achievement lay in the preparation of the famous *Breviarum Alarici*, a highly refined compilation of Roman law. This work, which interpreted laws as well as summarizing them, was approved by a committee of nobles and clerics before being promulgated in 506. It would become a standard text throughout post-Roman Gaul until the eleventh century.[19] Furthermore, Alaric courted the Ostrogoths. He married Theodoric's daughter, and with her produced an infant son, bringing the prospect of a vast and combined pan-Gothic federation into view.

Alaric's nemesis, however, arrived in the shape of Clovis, king of the Germanic Franks, who from the 480s had begun to extend his realm into Gaul from the Rhineland and who was already busy undermining the Burgundians. Clovis was a neophyte Catholic with limitless ambitions, and the ruler most likely to feel threatened by a union of the Goths.[20] In 497 he had joined with the Bretons to mount an attack along the western coast of Aquitaine, where the port of Burdigala (Bordeaux) was briefly occupied. Sometime after that, he won a crushing victory over his eastern neighbours, the Alemanni, and felt free to pay more attention to the south. Alaric's instinct was to avoid confrontation. He had once handed back a Frankish fugitive, Syagrius, who had dared to challenge Clovis. Gregory of Tours reports how the Visigoth insisted on going to Ambaciensis (Amboise), where he engaged Clovis in face-to-face conversation on an island of the River Loire:

> *Igitur Alaricus rex Gothorum cum viderit, Chlodovechum regem gentes assiduae debellare, legatus ad eum dirigit, dicens: 'Si frater meus vellit, insederat animo, ut nos Deo propitio pariter videremus.' . . .*

> When Alaric King of the Goths saw the constant conquests which Clovis was making, he sent delegates to him, saying: 'If my brother so agrees, I propose that we hold a conversation together, under God's auspices.' And when Clovis did not reply, Alaric went to meet him regardless, and they talked and ate and drank, and left each other in peace.[21]

As it turned out, Clovis could not be assuaged so easily. Recently allied both to the Burgundians, by marriage, and to the Byzantine emperor, who granted him the title of imperial consul, he aimed to steal a march on his rivals. A joint campaign against the Visigothic realm was agreed. The Byzantines were to patrol the southern coast. The Franks were to march from the north. An offer of parley from Theodoric the Ostrogoth was spurned. It was the spring of 507, and a 'flaming meteor' was lighting up the night sky:

> *Igitur Chlodovechus rex ait suis:* '*Valde molestum fero, quod hi Arriani partem teneant Galliarum . . .*
>
> King Clovis, therefore, addressed his warriors: 'It pains me that these Arians are holding such a large part of the Gauls. Let us march with God's aid, and reduce them to our power . . .' So the army moved off [from Tours] in the direction of Poitiers . . . Reaching the River Vigenna [Vienne], which was swollen by rain, the Franks did not know how to cross until a huge hind appeared and showed them how the river could be forded . . . Pitching his tent on a hill near Poitiers, the king saw smoke rising from the Church of St Hilaire, and took it as a sign that he was to triumph over the heretics.

The scene for the fateful battle was set:

> So Clovis came to grips with Alaric, King of the Goths, in the plain of Vouillé [*in campo Vogladense*], three leagues from the city. As was their custom, the Goths feigned flight. But Clovis killed Alaric with his own hand, himself escaping [an ambush] thanks to the strength of his breastplate and the speed of his horse.[22]

The outcome, therefore, was undisputable (and the Vouglaisiens have proof positive of their name's derivation). The power of the Visigoths in Gaul was broken in a few hours. And the Franks pressed on. Some of them rode over the central mountains to garner lands as far as the Burgundian frontier. Clovis made for Burdigala, where he wintered before sacking Tolosa the following spring. A remnant of Alaric's forces made a stand at Narbonne, but most of them withdrew to the line of the Pyrenees. The Gallic heartland of their kingdom was abandoned.

Henceforth, the Visigoths would rule in Iberia alone, preserving their ascendancy there until the arrival of the Moors two centuries later.

Explanations of the Frankish victory differ widely. The victors' version conveyed by Gregory of Tours stressed the hand of a Catholic God who had aided his Catholic warriors. Even Edward Gibbon stressed the role of religion, imaginatively casting the Gallo-Roman nobility in the role of a Catholic fifth column. His arguments are now contested.[23] He is on safer ground when he writes of the fickle fortunes of war. 'Such is the empire of Fortune (if we may still disguise our ignorance under that popular name)', wrote Gibbon loftily, 'that it is almost equally difficult to foresee the events of war, or to explain their various consequences.'[24]

For a decade or more, Theodoric the Ostrogoth continued to pursue his pan-Gothic dreams. He was the designated guardian of his grandson, Alaric II's young heir, Amalric, and the nominal overlord of a supposedly nascent 'empire' stretching from the Alps to the Atlantic. Yet the pillars of his own power were crumbling. He could not maintain order in Italy, let alone challenge the Franks in Gaul or assist the Visigoths in Spain. The moment was ripe for the Roman emperors in Constantinople to launch yet another strategic offensive. Shortly after Theodoric died in 526, the Emperor Justinian prepared to lead his legions to the West in person.[25] For the rest of the sixth century, as Alaric's descendants consolidated their hold on Iberia, imperial troops remained in Italy, while the successors of Clovis the Frank put their shoulder to the long task of transforming Gallia into Francia, and Francia into France.

III

Though the Visigothic Kingdom of Tolosa lasted for eighty-nine years over a wide area, the physical evidence for its existence is minimal. Archaeological excavations have yielded almost nothing.[26] Although one gold *solidus* of Alaric II has survived, most coins from Visigothic Tolosa carry imperial inscriptions. Several hundred marble sarcophagi from the period bear no marks of identification. Almost everything that is known comes from fragmentary written sources. Even the site of the battle with Clovis is not entirely certain. One group of antiquarians equates Gregory's *campus Vogladensis* with Vouillé, another group insists on locating it at the nearby village of Voulon.[27] There is almost no mention of the Visigoths in the widespread 'Heritage' activities of

Toulouse and Aquitaine.[28] Only recently has a comprehensive bibliography been compiled to help scholars piece the jigsaw together.[29]

The church of Nostra Domina Daurata – Notre-Dame de la Daurade – whose origins were connected with the Visigoths, was totally demolished in 1761 to make way for the construction of Toulouse's riverside quays. It had housed the shrine of a Black Madonna. The original icon was stolen in the fifteenth century, and its first replacement was burned by revolutionaries in 1799. Prints survive of an early medieval octagonal chapel lined with marble columns and golden mosaics. The present-day basilica, like the cathedral of St Saturnin, is entirely modern.[30]

Fortunately, the maps and the museums are not totally bare. A cluster of place names featuring the suffix *-ens*, as in Douzens, Pezens and Sauzens, all in the Département de l'Aude, is judged to betray Visigothic origins. The village of Dieupentale (Tarn-et-Garonne) possesses the only name of exclusively Visigothic provenance: *diup* meaning 'deep', and *dal*, 'valley'. Certain modest types of bronzes, eagle brooches and glassware are classed in the same way, thanks to similarities with finds in Rome's former Danubian provinces. And on the road between Narbonne and Carcassonne one passes the imposing whale-back Montagne d'Alaric. Local sources explain its name by reference to fortifications dating to the reign of Ataulf, and to a persistent myth concerning the last king of Tolosa's last resting place. The mountain shelters the ruins of a medieval priory, St Pierre d'Alaric and, on its northern slopes, a registered wine region which produces vintage wines within the scope of AOC Corbières.[31]

Nowadays, some of the strongest hints of a Visigothic past in southern France emanate unexpectedly from wild legends, from historical fiction, and in particular from one small village deep in the Pyrenean foothills. Rennes-le-Château is a walled, hilltop hamlet in the Pays de Razès, containing perhaps twenty houses, a church and a medieval castle. It commands enchanting views over the Val des Couleurs, and stands beneath the 'Holy Mountain' of Bugarach, starting point of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Identified as the ancient city of Rhedae, it gained a reputation in the nineteenth century for having been the impregnable stronghold of the Visigoths after their expulsion from none-too-distant Tolosa. The stone pillars of the parish church were said to be of Visigothic origin, and fabulous rumours of buried treasure proliferated.[32]

In 1885, the parish was taken over by an extraordinary, not to say notorious vicar, Father Bérenger Saunière (1852–1917). Together with his neighbour and colleague, the Abbé Boudet of nearby Rennes-les-Bains,

author of a bizarre volume on ancient Celtic languages,[33] Father Saunière dabbled both in history and in the occult. When renovating his church, he claimed to have discovered three parchments hidden inside a Visigothic pillar and covered in coded messages. Soon afterwards, he showed signs of ostentatious and unexplained wealth; the splendid villa and fake medieval folly which he built are still in place. When he was dying, his deathbed confession so shocked his confessor that the vicar was denied the last rites. His favourite motto, reportedly, was a quotation from Balzac: '*Il y a deux histoires: l'histoire officielle, menteuse, et l'histoire secrète, où sont les véritables causes des événements*' ('There are two sorts of history: lying official history and secret history, where the true causes of events can be found').[34]

To be fair, the Visigoths form only one of many elements in the fantastical pot-pourri of stories that have circulated since Father Saunière's death. They have been resurrected in the company of Cathars, Templars, Rosicrucians, the shadowy Priory of Sion, and the Holy Grail itself. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is but one of a dozen books that feed off the mysterious tales.[35] According to taste, the secret Treasure of Rhedae is variously described as the 'Jewels of the Visigoths' carried off from Rome or from Tolosa, or the 'Hoard of Jerusalem', brought by the Visigoths from Byzantium. The link with the so-called 'bloodline of Christ' hangs on yet more far-fetched suppositions, namely that St Mary Magdalene travelled to southern Gaul and that her descendants married into local Visigothic families.

Nonetheless, despite the efforts of the Vouglaisiens and the Rennains – not to be confused with the Rennois of Rennes-les-Bains – the modern French nation has never really warmed to the Visigoths. Their trail is far stronger in Spain than in the country where their statehood began. This is only to be expected. After the retreat from Aquitania, the Visigoths established themselves as the dominant element in Iberia. Their second realm, the Kingdom of Toledo, lasted twice as long as the Kingdom of Tolosa, and has penetrated deeply into modern Spanish consciousness.[36] The Visigothic kings, including the monarchs of Tolosa, are honoured by statues in Madrid,* but not in Toulouse.

Some imaginative method needs to be devised, therefore, for reclaiming the lost Visigothic culture of the Aquitanian era. It might be possible, for example, to work backwards from the known realia of Visigothic Spain. After all, the religious and artistic practices which the Visigoths

* Next to the Royal Palace in the Plaze de Oriente.

would have taken with them from Aquitania were dominant in parts of Iberia until the late sixth century; the Gothic speech, which Sidonius heard in Tolosa, held its own in Toledo until the seventh century; and the Visigoths' political culture as first defined by Euric continued to evolve until the eighth century. Of course, great care is needed. Not everything that bears the Visigothic label, like Visigothic Chant or Visigothic Script, derives from the Visigoths. And the Iberian cultural soil into which Visigothic customs were transplanted, though similarly Romanized, was not identical to that of Gallia Aquitania.

Even so, there are several leads to work on. In ecclesiastical architecture, the exquisite simplicity of the Visigothic church of San Pedro de la Nava at Zamora could well have had parallels in post-Roman Gaul. Its surviving horseshoe arches and tunnel vaulting were clearly inspired by something that went before it. The symbolism and style of Visigothic sacred art has Byzantine roots and would also have passed through Tolosa. The influence of Gothic language on the indigenous population, though limited, would have been much the same on both sides of the Pyrenees. Words such as *suppa* (soup) or *bank* (bench) belong to the long list of Germanisms adopted by the neo-Latin idioms.[37] And, since prayers learned in childhood are the ones remembered longest, we can plausibly assume that the Gothic form of the Lord's Prayer, as recited at every stage of the Visigoths' journey from the Danube to the Douro, was also recited devoutly at Nostra Domina Daurata:

Atta unsar þu in himinam	Our Father, Thou in Heaven
weihnai namo þein	Holy be Thy name.
qimai þiudinassus þeins	Thy kingdom come
wairþai wilja þeins	Thy will be done,
swe in himina jah ana airþai.	As in Heaven so on earth.
Hlaif unsarana þana sinteinan gif uns himma daga	Give us this day our daily loaf
jah aflet uns þatei skulans sijaima	And forgive us who are in debt
swaswe jah weis afletam þaim skulam unsaraim	As we also forgive our debtors.
jah ni briggais uns in fraistubnjai	Bring us not into temptation
ak lausei uns af þamma ubilin	But free us from the evil one.
Unte þeina ist þiudangardi jah mahts	For thine is the kingdom and might
jah wulþus in aiwins.	And glory in eternity.[38]

*

The fate of the Kingdom of Tolosa naturally prompts reflections about 'alternative history'. What would have happened if Clovis had been defeated, and the Visigoths had won? It was quite possible for them to have done so. The alternative *was* a possibility, and it opens up vistas of an unrealized future. On the eve of the Battle of Vouillé, the Franks controlled perhaps one-third of post-Roman Gaul. The Visigoths, Arian Christians, were becoming overlords of Iberia as well as southern Gaul, and were linked to the Ostrogoths in Italy. The bishop of Rome enjoyed no special position among the five patriarchs of Christendom, and by far the larger part of Europe remained pagan. Had Alaric II fought off Clovis, it is entirely realistic to envisage Western Europe dominated by a pan-Gothic hegemony, while a diminished Roman Church retreated before the double advance of Arianism and Byzantine Orthodoxy. In which case, France may never have come into being, or may have developed somewhere else or in a different way. The future power of the papacy, which the Franks were destined to promote, may not have come about. Nothing is inevitable. Nothing is perfectly predictable.

Yet the endless alternative scenarios, which exist at every stage of history, do not warrant too much attention. The past is not a board game that can be played and replayed at will. What happened happened. What didn't, didn't. Clovis the Frank *did* kill Alaric the Visigoth. The Franks drove out the Visigoths, and not vice versa. It is not unreasonable to maintain, therefore, that 'The history of France began at Vouillé'.

The story of the 'post-Roman twilight' is complicated enough as it is. Historians have to take account of the sheer diversity of the 'barbarians', and hence of the richly polycultural and multi-ethnic flavour of their intermingling with settled populations. Numerous unexpected twists and turns occurred in their interactions. Above all, the timescale was enormous. The gap between the collapse of the Western Empire in 476 and the emergence of recognizable modern states like France or England spans five hundred years at least. The post-Roman twilight lasted twice as long as the Western Empire itself.

In this respect, the example of the Visigoths serves as a case study for 'Barbarian Europe' as a whole. Their sojourn in Aquitania was but one stop on a very long road. Like their cousins, the Ostrogoths and the Lombards, and their sometime neighbours the Burgundians, they belonged to an ethnic and linguistic sub-group which has totally died out. Their customs and speech were not close to Frankish, which was the progenitor of modern Dutch and Flemish and which provided the catalyst for transforming Gallo-Roman Latin into Old French. It is

unlikely that Alaric II could have conversed with Clovis at Amboise without resorting either to Latin or to an interpreter. What is more, the Visigoths encountered many other 'barbarians' on the road, no doubt 'contaminating' their language, their culture and their gene pool in the process. Among them, the Vandals were East Germanic, the Suevi or 'Swabians' were Central Germanic, the Huns were Turkic, and the Alans were Iranic (like the modern Ossetians).[39]

Popular memory-making plays many tricks. One of them may be called 'the foreshortening of time'. Peering back into the past, contemporary Europeans see modern history in the foreground, medieval history in the middle distance, and the post-Roman twilight as a faint strip along the far horizon. Figures like Alaric or Clovis remain distant, faceless specks, unless plucked from their historical setting, magnified, dressed up and lionized for reasons of latter-day politics or national pride. Clovis I, king of the Franks, the victor of Vouillé, is commemorated by a magnificent tomb in the Parisian abbey of St Denis. Alaric II, whom Clovis killed, had ruled over a larger realm than that of the Franks. Yet he has no known grave, no modern monument.

Historical memory spurns even-handedness. The Visigoths must have known it. In their wisdom, they had buried their leaders in a traditional way which honoured the dead but which left no trace. The sepulchre of Alaric I, 'the Ruler of All', was washed into the sands of the sea long before his successors founded the Kingdom of Tolosa. No one but an occasional German Romantic cares to recall the moment:

Nächtlich am Busento lispeln
Bei Cosenza dumpfe Lieder.
Aus den Wassern schallt es Antwort
Und in Wirbeln klingt es wieder.

('Mournful songs whisper in the night / near Cosenza, along Busento's banks. / The waters murmur their answer, / and the whirlpools resound with singing.')[40]